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ABSTRACT

This report assesses the changes in language use, based on political and cultural uses, around the world and specifically in Thailand. Early global theories divided the nations of the world into central, semiperipheral, and peripheral. Later, this classification was changed to developed nations, developing nations, and the Third World. Then came North versus South. Many nations of Southeast Asia embarked upon ambitious programs to reach the supposed completed level of achievement of the Northern, developed countries. Sustainable development has become a paramount philosophy in the West, while this concept is still in its infancy in Southeast Asia, especially where material goods are still highly desired. The social structures and cultural values that caused the North to change its definition of development and how this change impacts on Southeast Asia today, especially on Thailand, are reviewed. The language of development for sociologists, economists, and the common person are discussed in terms of culture and cultural language. (Contains nine references.) (NAV)

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The Politics of Development: The Languages of Industrialization

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by

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The Politics of Development: The Languages of Development

Early global theories divided the nations of the world into three basic categories: central, semi-peripheral and peripheral. In later times, this classification was changed to the developed nations, those developing and the Third World. Then came the North-South division. Despite the terminology, these concepts gave the impression that the processes of development and industrialization could reach a finish-line, which once past, a nation was said to be "developed." In practical terms, many nations of Southeast Asia embarked upon ambitious programmes of industrialization seeking the material benefits of the Northern countries. Yet the North's perception of what is a developed nation, as opposed to a modernized one, has subtly changed over the last two decades. These days, the concept of sustainable development has become a paramount philosophy behind many Western countries development programmes. Yet this idea is still in its infancy in Southeast Asia, especially in those cultures which place high value on material goods. Just how to change a nation's policy makers, let alone the population at a grass roots level, to avoid the pitfalls the North suffered is a difficult task which harkens back to the very foundations of social structures and cultural values.

Introduction:

It is perhaps elementary and obvious to everyone to say that language is a vital tool to express thoughts, emotions and ideas. Yet with there being around 5000 languages in use in the world today, people still find it difficult to say exactly what they mean especially when dealing with abstract concepts and images. This problem becomes more acute when it is necessary to translate between languages as this impinges on cultural nuances, values and usages. One is never really sure if the translation conveys the *exact* meaning rather than just an *approximate* meaning. Any student of literature will tell you that reading a book in its original language gives the reader more insight into the ideas of the author. However, there are times when reading a translated copy is the only option available.

So it is with the concepts of industrialization and development. However the problems of conveying the significance of these notions to different nations is compounded by there being so many interpretations as to what they mean. Different people will speak of different things using the same language. Thus when it comes to developing countries to "translate" these ideas, who should they listen to ? Who speaks in the original language ? Moreover, by the time ideas have been "translated", is there a "revised edition" of the original ?

These are critical questions for developing countries at any stage of development. For many countries in Southeast Asia, they are the crucial questions which they face today. The forces which highlight today's global concerns are indeed the "updated and revised" edition of development and industrialization. Are those who make the decisions and determine development policy able to comprehend and translate effectively these new ideas ? Is it necessary to learn something new or is it simply a matter of re-phrasing the old ? These are the questions we shall consider.

The Language of Development for Sociologists:

The majority of the early global theories, expounded by sociologists in the 1960s, were concerned with explaining the inequalities between countries in the world. The gap existing between the rich nations of the First and Second World and the poor nations of the Third World needed to be justified in some rational manner and consequently these arm-chair protagonists began the spread of global jargon. Terms like the Third World became the language of the layman. In their place, countries were either in the centre (developed), the semi-periphery or the

periphery (the less developed). Later, these terms became more geographical and changed once again to North (centre) and South (periphery) . The theories themselves, in language more suited to the Cold War conflict between the communist East and the capitalist West, laid the blame for inequality on colonialism. This later became neo-colonialism which basically implied the dominance of large multinational companies (MNCs) who supposedly exploited the international division of labour in newly industrialized countries (NICs). Still later, MNCs became TNCs (Transnational Companies) and NICs were now NIEs (Newly Industrialized Economies). Finally the term globalization became widespread. That is until Ken Ohamae (1990 1) phrased it more passively and planet Earth became the "borderless world."

The process of creating new jargon continues. Yet despite the tongue-in-cheek approach adopted above, there is an underlining premise in not only these theories but industrialization policies in general, which implies that a nation can "catch-up" to a another. That is, there is some "finish line" which once passed, a country can be said to be developed. Many of the theories speak in such athletic terms. Moreover, while a country's industrialization may be seen in terms of "finishing the race", notions such as these hint of either no development once "past the post" or the possibility of a second race. Perhaps a better analogy would be a perpetual relay race with one of the baton changes as the defining criteria for a country to be developed. However, no matter what analogy or criteria one chooses, there is still the over-riding assumption that industrialization is an evolutionary process, always progressing forward towards some unspecified goal.

The Language of Development for Economists:
What is industrialization ?

Determining the finish line for industrialization is a complicated and as we shall see, an arbitrary process, dependent on what criteria is used to define or measure it. Economists have their own terms which are more appealing to the general masses - especially government bureaucrats - probably because they are easily expressed in numbers. And as everyone knows, explaining Thailand's economic growth rate of ten per cent is much easier than trying to define (let alone pronounce) the *Weltanschauung* of Thai society !

According to the dictionary, industrialization is defined as:

> " sustained economic growth following the application of inanimate sources of power to mechanize production." (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1988, p123)

An industrialized society is defined as one with the following characteristics:

i) the creation of a cohesive nation state organized around a common language and culture;
ii) the commercialization of production and the disappearance of a subsistence economy;
iii) the dominance of machine-production and the organization of production in the factory;
iv) the decline in the proportion of the working population engaged in agriculture;
v) the urbanization of society;
vi) the growth of mass literacy;
vii) the enfranchisement of the population and the institutionalization of politics around mass parties;

viii) the application of science to all spheres of life, especially industrial production, and the gradual rationalization of social life; (Abercrombie, *et al.* 1988, p122)

While this set of characteristics encompasses both social and political factors (expressed in the usual blurry jargon of the economist), the actual measuring of a country's performance is reduced to numbers. However, these numbers seem to take on divine dimensions and are worshipped by a country's finance and treasury officials in a way incomprehensible to the common man in the street. Not only is the growth rate iconized but also the lesser "gods" in the economic pantheon (GDP, GNP, CPI index, inflation rate and balance of trade etc.) are spoken in hushed reverence even though to others, their names are pure gibberish[1].

There are numerous others yet all come down to some sort of hard economic measurement. The inadequacy of these predominantly Western[2] concepts has recently been challenged by the United Nations which now attempts to measure the "quality of life" with a much more comprehensive list of both economic and non-economic variables.[3] However, most governments still cling to the traditional economic terms when it comes to industrialization policies and view other factors with only curiosity which is an unfortunate fact of life.

A closer examination of these determinants highlights not only their vagueness but also their absurdity. Thorough application of the first point, for example, would disqualify nearly every nation on earth from being considered "industrialized" due to the presence of significant language and cultural minorities. Similarly, rationalizing of social life in the last point, is ambivalent in meaning and suited more to the realm of the philosophers than government policy makers. Changing the wording or using different criteria is also unlikely to solve this problem. As pointed out above, nations still cling to economic factors as the principal way to measure the rate of development. Is this approach valid in trying to adequately comprehend today's changing world ?

The Language of Development for the Common Man:

Moreover, even if these components were perfect, they would still be subject to change over time. And herein lies the practical dilemma facing developing nations because this is precisely what has happened over the last three decades; the idea of development has been revised and substantially updated.

Development in the 1950s was primarily the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects; the "big is better" type approach. Later the application of high-grade scientific technology was seen as the saviour of the modern world. However, with the "green revolution" not delivering all

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1 For this light-hearted attack on economic terminology I apologize if I have offended any economists. However, many who use such terminology, do so without fully comprehending the philosophy behind the terms and concepts.

2 This observation and the subsequent arguement is not a diatribe against the West *per se'* but rather just a statement of historical fact. It matters little to the arguement where the set of measuring standards originates. What is important is that those used predominantly by all nations are principally economic.

3 The Human Development Index in the United Nation's annual *Human Development Reports* attempts to translate economic growth into human well-being. Some of the factors it combines include: life expectancy, educational level, purchasing power and available health services.

that it promised, the "small is beautiful" phase began to gain credence. This developed into the ecological movements of the 1970s which have since progressed to the sustainable development argument. Thus what was considered a development in the 1950s is no longer considered wholesome in the 1990s; the West has apparently awoken to its past follies. A developed country according to the measuring criteria in the 1950s is not so today because there exists different, and what could be termed, more mature expectations today.

Thus development is more a state of mind and a measure of maturity rather than anything which can be physically rationalized in terms of concrete and steel or more abstractly by genuflecting the venerable growth rate. Hence the concept of a finish line is a myth. In practical terms, this has important ramifications for policy makers and development planners, especially those in developing countries. If governments can grasp the essentials of this idea, they can then rid themselves of the illusion of industrialization. What good is it to pursue 1950s development goals which have been proven to cause more harm than good ? Not only can developing countries stop chasing double-figure growth rates with scant regard to their nation's human or natural resources but they can also avoid the pitfalls and problems which industrialization created in the West. In this regard, developing countries could threaten to both catch-up and indeed, overtake the West simply by "getting it right" the first time.

That then is the challenge facing the developing countries. Changing their whole approach to industrialization will be very difficult due to the weight of both external and internal forces which assail them. Also, while the benefits will be greater in the long run, they may be take longer time to realize. Hence, with a government's change of direction, there needs to be an accompanying change of attitude on behalf of the population. Despite the fact that poor farmers facing a constant struggle to survive are always susceptible to the financial inducements and exploitation of short-sighted development plans, people will need to understand that not all that glitters is gold, that big is not always better and that some technology or industrial practices are harmful and unsustainable. This task is difficult but not impossible. It has already occurred in the West and there are some signs that it is starting to occur in this region.

The process starts with the individual and the cultural values they hold dear. While Asia possess a wide mix of different cultures with many regional differences there are however, a number of similarities between Asian cultures. Concepts of face, status and respect for elders are generally universal throughout the region. Thus, while I will use specific examples of my own, Thai culture, aspects of these can be applied throughout many countries of the region.

The Language of One's Culture:

The concepts of face and status are intimately identified with images of the self and social interactions allow immediate reference to inner emotions. A person's feelings become attached to his face and thus his role and integrity can be defined by others by observing of this face. Moreover, the presentation of the self or ego through one's social face allows any social interactions to be used as weapons "to score points; to make the right contacts, to embarrass or put down rivals, to assert one's social superiority." (Collins, 1935. p157). In Thailand, where status in the social hierarchy is important, this is backed up with constantly at an interpersonal level through both language and gestures. For example, in Thai there are over twenty different words for the pronoun "I" depending on the relative status and familiarity of the speakers.

With this and other reinforcements, it follows that presentation is equally important to Thais. In exactly the same way as face, one's presentation is identified with the ego and projected for others to see. Thus one is not necessarily what one eats but in Thailand, one is definitely what one wears, what position one holds and how much money one earns. Thus society creates a social role for its participants and expects them to play their part. The sociologist, Erving Goffman (1967), described this type of role as a "frontstage" performance with the rest of society acting as the audience.

Examples of this type of behaviour are seen in the current fad of consumerism sweeping Asian nations. The propensity to advertise one's status through the visual display of symbols is now greater than ever because the monetary benefits of industrialization have given the new middle classes spending power. It is a common and almost natural human phenomena to purchase, when able, luxury items. Asians are certainly no different from anyone else in this regard and the items they buy are recognized internationally as symbols of success: Mercedes Benz cars, Rolex wristwatches and solid gold bracelets. Even factory girls, whose parents are still tilling the nce fields, will buy stereos and televisions virtually with the first pay-cheque.

While this consumerism is the same everywhere, there is however, a slight difference in the philosophy behind it. In many Asian countries, people are almost encouraged to spend money on material items simply because the society expects them to. It is all tied up with presentation of status. In Thailand, for example, stinginess with money is looked down upon whereas in societies such as Australia, the ability to use money wisely and to save money is quite highly regarded. In Thailand, it is expected that a senior director or even a personnel manager will own an expensive car and many people will go into debt to meet this social expectation. This is not the same in the West. I read recently where British Rail refused to buy the chairman a company car, instead they gave him unlimited free travel on their trains. This would be unheard of in Thai society.

In Thailand, these frontstage performances and presentations represent actual reality and are meant to be taken as such. The fact that the form or substance behind these "actors" does not necessarily live up to the performance is not contradiction nor hypercritical; the discerning Thai social audience with proper regard for the actors face, will not look too hard towards the backstage. Again this is reinforced by the language. While there are over twenty different ways for saying "I" in Thai, in reality it is more common for people to express the pronoun in the third person as if it was *someone else* altogether. For example, if Sompot is telling Winai that yesterday he went to the market, he might say "Yesterday, Sompot went to the market."

However, other cultures are more demanding in peering behind the cultural mask. At a governmental level, providing substance where it was hitherto unnecessary, is another problem of the rapidly changing global scene with its increasing demands. Attempts to redress the situation again should be directed at the individual members of the bureaucracy directly responsible for implementing the nation's development policies. However, this can pose some special problems.

Research on cultural values carried out by questioning a cross-section of over 4000 Thai citizens, revealed that government officials as a group, placed more emphasis on socializing than achievement (Komin, 1991, p209-213). In effect, this means that the very people who were in charge of implementing development schemes have the lowest motivation for the job. What they were more interested in was obtaining more power, prestige and status. In practice this

often means a condescending approach taken to dealing with local villagers who are neither as well educated nor posses the relevant status symbols. Komin (*op.cit.* p197) cites the example of northeastern Thai villagers who perceived water resources as their top priority development need, while the local government officials saw public health services as being of greater importance. It needs little imagination to realize that the "form over substance" argument accounts for the difference in perceptions; a new hospital is nicer to look at than a muddy well.

Another example is Bangkok's notorious traffic. The root cause of the problem is that there are too many cars using too few roads. However, with cars being a recognized status symbol, government attempts to rectify the situation are based on preserving the car while at the same time presenting modern technology as the only way to save Bangkokian's from perpetual motionless in the world's largest parking lot. Thus schemes such as the current sky-train project, which actually reduce road area still further are the government's favourite. In their eyes, they look good and are "state of the art" therefore they must be the answer. The fact that it will not reduce the number of cars on the road because society expects people to drive, is beside the point to the planner. That ownership of a car is a social expectation is further evidenced by the government's latest answer to traffic chaos: turning footpaths into road (*Bangkok Post*, 26 March, 1995). The poor pedestrian, who is actually reducing the traffic problem by walking, is virtually seen as being an undesirable element in Thai society. Thus the real point of all these bureaucratic plans is not to actually solve the problem (simple implementation of Singapore's traffic zone system would go a long way in achieving this), but to *be seen* to be doing something because in Thai society the presentation is the reality.

This is not necessarily a bad trait in itself; it certainly leads to much social harmony. However, it should be used with discretion and for government planners it should be avoided completely. From speaking to many middle-level bureaucrats, the picture is as bad as it appears - at that level at least. There are many competent men and women who have been exposed to the changing Western attitudes and are very concerned with Thailand's development. The trouble seems to lie predictably with those in power, the actual decision makers and not so much with policy planners. It is these decision-makers which research has shown to be suffering from more delusions of grandeur than anyone else (Komin, *ibid.*). Hence, modernization is perceived as development and the purchasing of prominent technical infrastructure as evidence of being a developed nation. Unfortunately, without attention to detail and a change in the purchasing philosophy, what one often ends up with are high-tech appliances inappropriately ordered by low-tech politicians.

Speaking One's Cultural Language More Clearly:

The solution, involves more than formal education although that is certainly a part of it. Possibly, some of these decision makers know that some of their decisions are not the best for the country in the long run but like the poor manager "forced" to buy a Mercedes, social and political pressures compel them to take the decision they do. Thus, it is really the society as a whole which needs to change and this involves either an introduction of a new set of ethics or re-evaluating those which already exist in the society. The course of action which is most likely to succeed is the second where the ethics and values already operating in a society are re-evaluated with more emphasis given to those which seem to have been forgotten. In other words, one must speak one's cultural language more clearly.

Historically, this has been the case with Thailand. Prior to the 1932 revolution which abolished the absolute monarchy, development in Thailand or Siam as it was then, was a gradual process which needed to be carefully considered lest opposition from social forces stopped it altogether. Thus with King Mongkot, the formal class system was abolished and the deity of the King renounced. With King Chulalongkorn coming to power in 1868, the government bureaucracy was gradually established and the modernization of the country began in earnest. And while ideas and technology was imported from the West and Japan, it was only the most appropriate technology considered to be in harmony with Thai social values which was imported. Thus there was some discernment on behalf of the Thais. However, after the 1932 revolution all that changed. Development became more urgent and there was not so much discretion as to whether this development was in accordance with Thai social values. Indeed, I argue that the imbalances we see in Thailand's development today stem from around this time (especially since the late 1950s) and are due to the government adopting a new set of foreign values, namely those which encouraged the pursuit of economic values at the expense of social values.

The traditional social values at this time were also forcibly westernized by the introduction of a series of Cultural Mandates by the dictator Phibun in 1942. Thus January 1st became New Years Day, men were compelled to wear western dress in public and to kiss their wives before leaving for work. Indeed, the common greeting, *sawut dee* so commonly heard today, has only been in existence since this time. When another dictator, Field Marshall Sarit announced a new "revolution" to industrialize Thailand in 1958, he simultaneously launched the country onto its modern development course while at the same time forbidding the teaching of traditional Buddhist texts which preached against excessive greed and covetousness[4].

This has resulted in what we see in Thailand today, an enviable economy from a conventional economic viewpoint - high growth rate, low inflation etc. - but a disruption to traditional social life - farmers who were encouraged to grow cash crops forever face impoverishment when world prices fall; the break-up of families as members are forced to seek employment in Bangkok; or the selling of small family farms to rich land developers and speculators. Today, there are large imbalances in Thailand's wealth distribution and education. At present, 60% of the population share only 23.1% of the country's wealth, while only around 20% of the workforce have gone beyond primary school (TDRI *in press* - reported in *The Bangkok Post* March 6, 1995, p30).

Yet these problems are not confined to Thailand. Similar ones exist in nearly all the Southeast Asian countries. What decision makers must ask themselves, is who benefits from all this development ? Perhaps if governments showed more vision earlier and controlled their desire to have the regions highest growth rate, then more balanced development might have resulted. Instead of a 10% growth rate leaving Thailand with serious problems, might not a 7-8% growth rate been sufficient ?

This is the challenge which awaits those countries beginning on their modernization course such as those of Indochina. For other countries, like Thailand, the challenge is to change their courses and to increase their global awareness so as not to be left behind in a world that is changing faster everyday. The answer lies with developing not so much the infrastructure as it

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4 See Wyatt (1984, chapters 7-10), Mulder (1992 p121-124) ,Swearer in Sivaraksa ,(1992, p133-177) and the excellent Sivaraksa (1988) for background and more thoughts on these events.

does the correct state of mind. The economic promises of the old approach have been exposed as myths. There is no end point or finish line to development; modern sky-scrapers and elevated transport systems will not replace rainforest or put food into the stomachs of impoverished farmers. Decisions need to be taken with right understanding and right viewpoint. Change in a nation's attitude must arise from a change in the attitude of its individual citizens. This should come from within and thus the changes will be compatible with traditional national culture yet at the same time be in harmony with the wider concerns of the globe today. Traditional Asian cultures, be they Buddhist, Islamic, or Taoist, have in them the capacity for this. It is now the time for developers, bureaucrats and indeed every single individual to stop speaking the language of economists or sociologists and in their own languages speak for the planet.

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